


ANCIENT WISDOM AND MODERN PROBLEMS

By Francis Story

he history of man's conquest of his environment has been from the earliest times a story of adaptation to changes wrought by his own increasing mastery of the technique of living. It has been, at best, but a partial conquest; differences in mode of living have not necessarily been accompanied by the changes in mode of thought or outlook that might be expected. Man remains, below the surface, a primitive animal; his instincts work themselves out in the pattern of a more complex civilization and his responses are to situations apparently far removed from those that confronted his forebears, yet the instincts themselves are not different. They remain basically unchanged since the time of the earliest records left to us.

Events and situations arise from character, and while the instincts that bring them about remain

unchanged, the situations and problems themselves must be fundamentally the same, though they appear in different garb. The facile post-Darwinian optimism which, through a misinterpretation of the theory of evolution, believed that mankind was steadily improving, has been discarded. Knowledge, however far it may advance, cannot liberate the spirit of man, though it may free him from some intellectual bonds, only to replace them by others. Egoism, craving and the will-to-live are dominant factors, to which mere knowledge, without the saving grace of wisdom, must remain subservient.

A cursory glance at the earliest Theravada Buddhist texts is sufficient to show that the problems of today had their counterparts in the India of 2500 years ago.

The Life-impulse and will-to-live in all beings springs from craving, and the Buddha, at the time of his Enlightenment, declared, "Vainly have I wandered for many births, seeking the builder of this house; painful was repeated birth. Now O Builder of the house, you are found; you shall build no house again". The house is the corporeal form; the builder is craving, the tenacious instinct to cling to life, to experience why the problems that confront humanity now are fundamentally the same as those that have vexed it from the dawn of history; they are merely transposed into a different key, given a global instead of a limited personal or tribal implication.

In the life of today, religion, once a major factor in world history, plays a relatively unimportant part. The

attitude of the modern man, his mind attuned to other and apparently more immediate and practical affairs, is conditioned by religion only to the extent to which early training, impressed on a pliant consciousness, remains with him to colour his mental landscape. Among large sections of the world's people, formal religion has ceased to have any active influence; actions are weighed and judged, not by religious or moral standards, but by their success or failure from the purely mundane point of view. They have ceased to be "right" or "wrong" and have become simply practical or impractical. An opportunist ethos has been established in place of the former *Mystique* as a governing principle in human behaviour, as the result of a decline in the belief in an after-life with its concomitant of retributive justice. In one sense this may be accepted as a step in the direction of rationalism; but since the motivating factor behind opportunist action remains still the old instinct of savage man, the part played by reason is only a subsidiary one. Reason is employed in the service of motives that are essentially unreasonable.

In a famous Discourse, the *Brahmajala Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*, the Buddha enumerates sixty-two types of religio-philosophical systems current in His day, ranging from transcendental idealism to gross materialism, rejecting all of them. The Indian speculative mind was capable of meta-physical subtleties that have not been known in Europe since the days of Mediaeval Schoolmen, and many of these ancient Brahmanic theories have

disappeared from the world, leaving only their names; but the more pronounced and antagonistic of the doctrines are to be found with us still, some of them masquerading as the latest developments of human thought. In another Discourse, the *Apannaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the Buddha deals with one such “ism” in the following words: “There are some ascetics and Brahmins who hold and maintain that there is nothing given, sacrificed or offered, there is no ripening of the fruit of good or bad actions, there is neither this world nor another world, there is neither mother nor father, nor apparitional beings, there are in the world no ascetics nor Brahmins who have gone and followed the right way, and who of themselves have realized the world with higher knowledge and proclaim it...

In this case, householders, it is to be expected that those ascetics and Brahmins who hold and maintain that there is no ripening of the fruit of good or bad actions, and that there is no other world ... will abandon the three good things, good behaviour in deed, word and thought, and will embrace and practice the three bad things, evil behaviour in deed, word and thought. And why is that? Because they do not see the danger and folly and depravity of bad things nor the blessing of renunciation and the purity of good things. Though there is indeed another world, their view is that there is not, and that is a false view. Though there is indeed another world, they decide that there is not, and that is their false resolve. Though there is indeed another world, they assert that

there is not, and that is false speech. Though there is indeed another world, they say that there is not, and act directly contrary to those arahats who have a knowledge of the other world. Though there is indeed another world, they instruct others that there is not, and this is instruction of false doctrine. With this instruction of false doctrine they exalt themselves and disparage others. Thus their former virtue is destroyed and immorality is produced, and there results this false view, false resolve, false speech, this instruction of false doctrine opposed to the noble ones, this exaltation of themselves and disparaging of others. Even so these many bad things arise on account of their false view.

“In this case, householders, an intelligent man reflects thus: If there is no other world, then this individual with the dissolution of the body will attain safety (by annihilation) but if there is another world, this individual with the dissolution of the body after death will be reborn in an unhappy state of sufferings. If you like, suppose there is no other world or suppose the words of these ascetics and brahmins to be true. Yet this individual gets blamed by the intelligent even in this life for holding false views and for being a nihilist. But if there really is another world, this individual has the unlucky cast in both cases, as he gets blamed even in this life by the intelligent for holding false views, and with the dissolution of the body after death he will be reborn in an unhappy state. Thus this particular doctrine is badly taken and embraced; he persists in being one-sided, and

he gives up a sound position.”

“In this case it is to be expected that those ascetics and brahmins who hold and maintain that there is ripening of good and bad actions that there is another world, will abandon the three bad things, evil behaviour in deed, word and thought, and will embrace and practise the three good things, good behaviour in deed, word and thought. And why is this? Because they see the danger and folly and depravity of bad things, and the blessing of renunciation and purity of good things. Thus their former vice is destroyed and virtue is produced, and there results this right view, right resolve, right speech, this instruction in the true doctrine not opposed to the noble ones, their avoidance of exalting themselves and disparaging others. Even so these many good things arise on account of their right view”. Preaching on the doctrine of Kamma, the scientific law of action and reaction, to a Brahmin student, Subha, the Buddha touches on a problem greatly highlighted in present day thought, that of human inequality:

This manifestation of inequalities among beings must always be a feature of human life, and it is thus that Buddhism explains the seeming injustices to which people are subject from birth. The doctrine of Kamma presents life and the universe in the light of logical and impartial law, a law, moreover, which is strictly in accordance with scientific principles of cause and effect.

When the Buddha was asked concerning the welfare of nations and communities, with special

reference to the Vajjians, a clan threatened by its neighbours, He said, "So long, Ananda, as the Vajjians shall assemble repeatedly and in large numbers (for unity), just so long may the prosperity of the Vajjians be expected, and not their downfall. So long, Ananda, as the Vajjians assemble in harmony and disperse in harmony, so long as they do their business in harmony, so long as they do not introduce any revolutionary ordinance, or break up any established ordinance, but abide by the old-time Vajjian Law, as ordained; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and respect the elders among the Vajjians and deem them worthy of listening to; so long as the women and maidens of the families dwell without being forced or abducted; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and worship the Vajjian shrines, both the inner and the outer; so long as they allow not the customary offerings, given and performed, to be neglected; so long as the customary watch and ward over the Arahats that are among them is well kept, so that they may have free access to the realm and having entered may dwell pleasantly therein; just so long as they observe these principles, Ananda may the prosperity of the Vajjians be expected, and not their decay."

Revolutionary as were the Teachings of the Buddha in the sense of substituting ethical rules and setting up principles of conduct in place of the formalised ritualism of His Brahmanic contemporaries – a feature which emerges clearly and consistently throughout His discourses - it is evident that in temporal matters He

advocated the preservation of all customs which time had proved to be beneficial, and condemned only those which were socially retrogressive, as for instance caste; or spiritually obscure, as in the priestly emphasis on ceremonial sacrifice and extreme ascetism, which in Buddhism is stigmatised as “superstition”. In the matter of caste, the Buddha, as we have already seen, acknowledged distinctions as being inseparable from the working-out of Kamma; what He expressly denied was the Brahmanic teaching that caste was of divine origin, and the animistic concept that the four major castes of Indian society took their origin from different parts of the body of Brahma. This is succinctly set forth in those verses of the Dhammapada which proclaim that a Brahmin is a Brahmin not by birth but by purity of thought, word and deed. “Neither by matted hair nor by birth does one become a Brahmin. But in whom there exists both truth and Dhamma, he is the pure one, and he is the Brahmin”. (*Dhammapada*, 393). It is worthy of note that in dealing with the question from the purely social angle, the Buddha placed the Khattiya Caste (nobility) highest in rank. Distinctions are obtained on the worldly level, but for those who have renounced the world there are no distinctions, the worth of the holy man is measured by his virtue alone.

This principle has its broader application in the sphere of present day racial and nationalistic problems. In Buddhism there is no basis for racial superiority – cults or antagonisms. Each man has his own individual

worth, irrespective of his racial or cultural background.

The question of human rights is inextricably bound up with that of individual responsibilities. In the present pre-occupation with the rights of communities and individuals there is a tendency to overlook the fact that the concept of rights implies also the ideas of obligations and duties. At about the same time that the Buddha was preaching in India, Confucius in China was proclaiming this truth in his own doctrine of rationalistic humanism. While Confucius outlined his concept of the ideal ruler, benign, just and ever-solicitous for the welfare of his people, the Buddha was turning the thoughts of His disciples away from the old idea that the duties enjoined by religion were ritualistic performances, to the higher ideal of a layman's duty, his responsibility to others.

In the *Sigalovada Sutta* He preaches to a young Brahmin who was following his father's behest to worship the six directions, north, south, east, west, the zenith and the nadir, with clothes and hair wet and clasped hands uplifted. "But in the religion of an Ariya, young householder, it is not thus that the six directions should be worshipped." Thus the Buddha began His instruction, and went on to explain that the worshipping of the six quarters is to be understood in an ethical sense. First comes a general description under numerical heads, of things to be avoided by a householder, as leading to ruin and disrepute and virtues to be cultivated as being conducive to happiness and prosperity. The sermon then continues: "And how, young householder, does the Ariyan

disciple honour and protect the six directions? The following should be looked upon as the six directions – parents as the East, teachers as the South, wife and children as the West, friends and companions as the North, servants and work-people as the nadir, religious teachers and holy men as the zenith”. This is followed by a detailed explanation of a man’s duty towards each of these classes of people as they stand in relation to himself, the whole forming a discourse on social ethics that is unrivalled for its breadth and nobility of conception, as well as for its universal applicability. Two examples will suffice to show how the idea of reciprocity in duties is emphasised.

“In five ways should a clansman minister to his friends and associates as the Northern direction; by generosity, courtesy and benevolence, by treating them as he treats himself, and by being true to his word. In these five ways thus ministered to as the Northern direction, his friends and associates love him; they shield him when he is off his guard, and on such occasions protect his property; they become a refuge in danger, they do not forsake him in his troubles, and they show consideration for his family. Thus is the Northern direction by him protected and made safe and secure.”

“In five ways does an Ariyan master minister to his servants and employees as the Nadir: by assigning them work according to their strength; by supplying them food and wages; by tending them in sickness; by sharing with

them unusual delicacies and by granting them proper recreation. In these ways ministered to by their master, servants and employees love their master in five ways: they rise before him; they lie down to rest after him; they are content with what is given to them; they do their work well, and they spread abroad his praise and good fame. Thus is the Nadir by him protected and made safe and secure."

The Buddha's treatment of the theme is typical of the way in which He was accustomed to take some already existing religious belief and give it a higher spiritual or ethical meaning; He conveyed His own higher truth through the medium of a current tradition. It must be remembered that the Buddha did not teach a new Dhamma; He preached the "Ancient Truth" of the Buddhas before Him. Although their Teachings had passed out of men's memories, or had survived only in the form of outward observances whose inner significance had been lost, it still remained, and remains, the universal unchanging Dhamma, the underlying principle of cause and effect that governs phenomenal existence. Of the Buddha it can truly be said that He came, to fulfil it; to re-state it in its highest spiritual meaning.

We stand now at a turning-point in history; the choice is ours whether we shall take the road that leads to further progress or that which will carry us to destruction. Mankind has had enough experience at least to show that scientific knowledge and mastery of the

material universe is not the same thing as progress in civilization. Our eyes must be turned in a new direction if we are to find a way out of the impasse. But, just as we are bounded by the curved space-time of physics, so we are encircled by the sphere of related concepts. That which is newest is most immeasurably old; the Eternal Dhamma, the ageless Truth beyond our small world of material concerns. It is to that we must return, in all humility and hope, for the old diseases we must seek the old remedies. But in the sphere of truth there is nothing old and nothing new. The sun that sinks this evening in the West will rise again tomorrow in the East. ■